

Testimony of Maegan Adams
in Support of HB6759 An Act Concerning Early Childhood

Senator McCrory, Representative Curry, Ranking members Berthel and McCarty and members of the Education Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on HB6759 An Act Concerning Early Childhood.

My name is Maegan Adams, I live in Harwinton and I am the Executive Director for Bristol Child Development Center which is a high quality, state-funded, non-profit, licensed, and nationally accredited institution serving children between 12 weeks and 10 years old. Our families are primarily low-income and rely on our income based, state-funded child care slots, and Care4Kids subsidies to be able to afford childcare which is necessary for them to work. In addition, I am also the Co-President of the CT Association for the Education of Young Children.

Early childhood education is the fundamental building block for learning and if nurtured appropriately, creates the foundation for educational success for years to come. We have learned so much about developmentally appropriate practice in the younger years over the past decade and have made drastic improvements in the expectations of teachers. Early childhood educators have one of the most important and influential positions in a child's life between the ages of infancy right up to kindergarten.

We require our teachers to meet specific educational requirements, and expect them to continue their education and improve on their practice. However, almost all our teachers are making minimum wage regardless of their advanced degrees. It is tragically ironic that teachers who take out student loans to pursue higher education to better prepare themselves as educators are then forced to leave the field because they cannot financially survive or pay back their student loans. In short, early childhood educators cannot afford to be teachers.

We have lost a large number of teachers over the past two years, many are leaving because we cannot afford to pay them what they can make in other organizations that do not require degrees or education. We've been left with staff shortages and vacant classrooms, all while having a substantial wait list for families needing child care. Raising the pay and benefits of teachers would allow for our staff to be paid what they're worth. Many are required to have the same certifications as the public school teachers, however, they work more, and are paid a fraction of what their counterparts are paid. Increasing wages would bring more to our field, thus filling vacant positions, opening classrooms, and allowing the early childhood sector to thrive as it should.

In 2015, funded full day preschool slots received \$8,924.00 per student per year, this is for a 6-to-10-hour day, for a minimum of 50 weeks per year. Minimum wage was \$9.15 per hour. Today, we receive that exact amount in funding per student, but minimum wage is increasing to \$15.00 per hour as of June 1, 2023. Minimum wage has increased by over five dollars per hour, which is about a 60% increase, but our reimbursement rates have not moved at all in the last eight years.

I encourage you to think about what the cost of living was eight years ago, nothing compared to what it is right now and will be in the next few months. It is also important to note that our qualified and college educated staff deserve much more than minimum wage for the job that they do. They deserve comparable wages to that of public school educators, as the education requirements are similar, the hours are longer and the year is continuous so that the parents in our economy, can continue work to

provide to for their families. The Governor's proposal to raise the School Readiness rates to \$10,500 in FY25 is not enough. The OEC's Narrow Cost Analysis puts the cost of pre-k at \$16,138, far less than the proposed increase. Educators will continue to leave the field for higher paying jobs in other industries.

We are receiving about 50% of what it truly costs to run a high-quality classroom, our staff are struggling, morale is down, and no one is joining our field which is leaving classrooms empty and families needing childcare. Without the appropriate funding I foresee a very dim and gloomy future for the early childhood field and the educators as we will be forced to make budgetary decisions that will jeopardize our quality, staff, and programming. The ENTIRE system needs equitable support across all settings. Because our funding comes through the Office of Early Childhood, we cannot adjust our tuition to help increase revenue, we are a flat-funded program which is soon to be operating in the red. we need on-going, transformational change and substantial wage supplements and benefits all early childhood programs.

The proposed salary scale would cost an additional \$350.00 per student per month for my agency specifically, then an additional 3% for salary increase each year after. The Governor's proposal to increase preschool slot reimbursement to \$10,500.00 falls about \$3,000.00 short of what we need per year to just begin to implement the salary scale. Additionally, the infant and toddler increase that we just received was only about \$700.00 per student per year, which also puts us around \$3,000.00 short of the true reimbursement we need to ensure our staff are paid based on the new scale. We cannot pass these fees onto parents as we are a state funded program which requires us to calculate parent share of fees based on their income and household size. We receive our funding to run our agency from the state reimbursement, parent fees, and for some families that qualify, care4kids- which is also now on a waitlist, with the proposal to cut access for families in need, thus lowering our potential reimbursement from them. So, as you can see, we cannot increase our tuition to help support the salaries for our more than deserving staff as we solely rely on subsidized funding to support our families.

The Governors proposed budget will spend \$50 million dollars less in early childhood from the general fund than was spent last year when we have a 3 ½ billion dollar surplus and a full rainy day fund. Turnover in early childhood programs has accelerated, 20% of child care slots are sitting vacant because programs do not have qualified staff to teach the children. Families are unable to work because they can't find care for their children. Care4Kids is now waitlisted, and parents will be forced to wait or struggle to pay for childcare. Many families cannot afford childcare without the support of Care4Kids. This is all happening as our "rainy day fund" and budget surplus sit idle while we wait for the inevitable collapse of this industry.

If the childcare sector collapses, thousands of adults will be unable to work which will lead CT into a recession. We can see the beginning of that happening all ready. It's time for CT to prioritize our state's future generations by investing in a system that supports families, children, the economy, and workforce. Please show that Connecticut's young children are your priority by passing a budget that will allow for transformational change in early childhood funding.

Thank you,

Maegan Adams